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# **Sexual beginners. Accounting for first sexual intercourse in Italian young people's heterosexual biographies**

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## **Abstract**

Based on survey data on 1000 young people aged 18-29 and semi-structured interviews with 51 young people aged 18-34 living in a North-Western Italian region, the article explores how they account for their first heterosexual intercourse. Young people describe and make sense of their experiences by referring to sexual scripts; narrative sequences which represent the legitimate rules and moves of the heterosexual game. The article shows the complex intertwining of compliance with, adaptation, negotiation and challenge to gendered sexual scripts. On the one hand, at the beginning of their sexual careers young people follow gendered scripts strongly shaped by a double standard: young men more often place their first sexual intercourse within a context of emotional and relational detachment, while young women tend to interpret their sexual debut as a romantic experience. On the other hand, the research findings point to processes of negotiation and re-definition of scripts based on three different cultural logics: the denaturalization of sexual scripts; the reversal or inversion of gendered scripts; and the convergence to or the construction of a common 'degendering' script.

## **Keywords:**

Heterosexuality; youth; sexual script; account

Research on sexuality in the field of social sciences has demonstrated the importance of sociocultural factors in shaping sexual behaviour: sex is not understood as a natural

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act (Tiefer 1995), but acknowledged as a culturally informed experience which is socially produced, socially organized, socially maintained and socially transformed (Plummer 2005, xii). A fundamental tool for a sociocultural analysis of sexuality is the concept of sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon 2005, 1987), a set of meanings, beliefs and practices that 'defines the situation, names the actors, and plots the behavior' (Gagnon and Simon 2005, 13), thereby structuring sexual conduct.

In Western sexual culture, a historical feature ruling heterosexual conduct and shaping male and female sexualities is the so-called 'double standard'<sup>1</sup>: women were supposed to be less interested in sex and were expected to avoid any sexual activity before and outside heterosexual marriage; whereas men were depicted as struggling to 'sow their wild oats'. While women were pictured within a Madonna-Whore dichotomy, men were presented as helplessly driven by their sexual needs.

From the 1970s onwards, many scholars pointed to a deep transformation of sexual and intimate life, entailing a democratisation of intimate relationships, a pluralisation of relationship patterns and recognition of sexual diversity (Giddens 1994, Hawkes 2004, Weeks 2007). This change of sexual culture has entailed a progressive fading of the sexual double standard towards the emergence of a single sexual standard, especially concerning experiencing sexual intercourse before marriage. Researchers have focussed on the age at which this event occurs or, sometimes, on the features of the first sexual partner, underlining a converging process between the way men and women typically experience their 'sexual debut' (Lauman et al. 1994, Baios and Bozon 2008, Barbagli, Dalla Zuanna, and Garelli 2010). Nevertheless, more in-depth qualitative research exploring the processes of

social construction, reproduction and redefinition of sexuality, outlines the persistence of the sexual double standard and, for young women, the complexity of managing their sexual reputation (Kitzinger 1995, Thompson 1995, Steward 1999, Marques 2009).

Qualitative research also finds evidence of a negotiation and redefinition of the sexual double standard. While young women tend to develop more assertive sexual subjectivities within heterosexual relationships, some young men seem to ‘mix up’ traditional and non-traditional scripts to make sense of their heterosexual experiences (Wight 1996, Harris, Aapola and Gonick 2000, Jackson and Cram 2003, Allen 2003, 2007, Maxwell 2007,, Korobov 2008). In sum, while some scholars identify a shift towards a ‘convergence script’ challenging the traditional gendered sexual double standard, others point to its persistence under new and multidimensional forms, stressing the importance of taking into account the multiple local contexts of the production of its rules and boundaries.

This article provides an in-depth exploration of Italian young people’s first heterosexual experiences, examining the different scripts they use when accounting for their first experience of sexual intercourse and when discussing their expectations about the right ‘sexual timing’ for both boys and girls. It draws on two recent research projects carried out in 2006: a survey on sexual attitudes and behaviour of a national sample of 3,000 Italian men and women aged 18 to 70 (ISI 2006)<sup>2</sup>; and a survey on the sexual lifestyles of a local sample of 1,000 young men and women aged 18 to 29 living in a Northern Italian region with 51 in-depth interviews with young men and women aged 18 to 34 (ISP 2006). The article shows how young people take up and

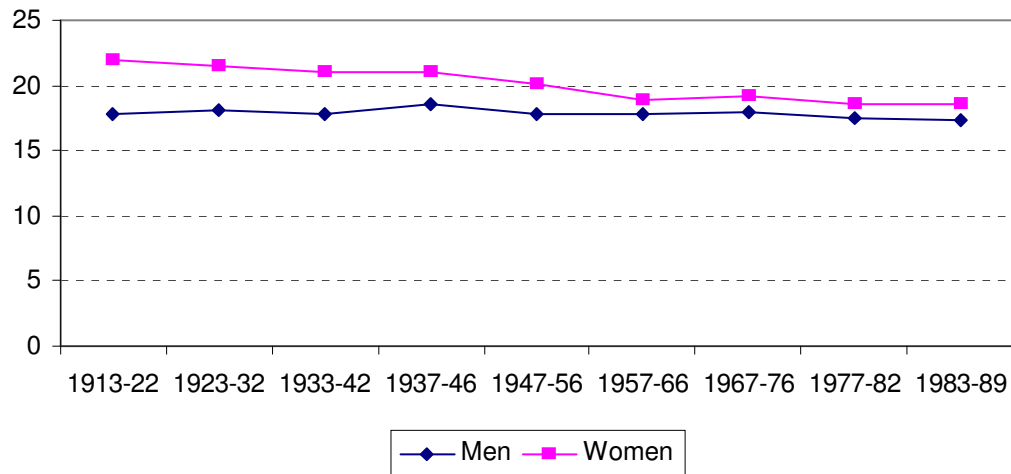
manage the cultural tools available in contemporary sexual culture, in a complex intertwining of compliance with, adaptation and negotiation of, and challenge to gendered sexual scripts.

### **Some features of the Italian sexual landscape<sup>3</sup>**

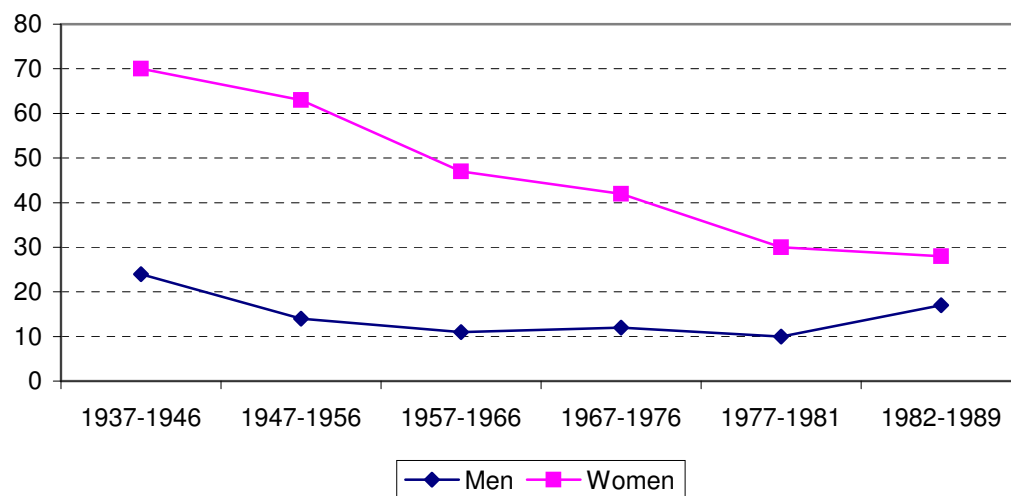
In many European countries, research on young people's sexual behaviour has shown an increasing convergence of young men and women's sexual conduct, often focussing on indicators like the median age at first intercourse, the number of sexual partners or the variety of sexual practices (Billari, Caltabiano and Dalla Zuanna 2007, Baio and Bozon 2008). However, in comparison with Central and Northern European countries, in Italy the young people are more likely to stay at their parents' home, often until marriage and there is a relatively strong institutionalisation of marriage, with low levels of premarital cohabitation, marital instability and births outside marriage (Barbagli, Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna 2003, Therborn 2004, Zanatta 2008).

As far as sexual behaviour is concerned, the specificity of the Italian context mainly concerns women. Younger cohorts of Italian men seem to have become more similar to their Central and Northern European counterparts, while, despite the great changes that have occurred in Italy in women's sexuality (due to an emerging public discourse, in the 70s, on women's right for sexual self-determination), the differences between Italian women and those of other countries appear as more persistent, with stricter norms of respectability. However, recent research (Barbagli, Dalla Zuanna and Garelli 2010) has pointed to the same trend of the convergence of young men and women towards a seemingly degendered single sexual script. This is evident if we

compare the median age and the partner at first intercourse, as well as the number of partners and the percentage of people having one sexual partner during their lifetime.



**Fig. 1 Median age at first sexual intercourse. Comparison by gender and cohorts. Samples interviewed in 1976 (born in 1913-42) and 2006 (born in 1937-89).**



**Fig. 2 Percentage of Italian people having one sexual partner lifelong. Comparison by gender and cohorts. Sample interviewed in 2006.**

These figures show that Italian young people are adopting more and more similar sexual scripts, as women have progressively changed their sexual behaviour, stepping outside the traditional normative model of the older generations. What these figures do not tell us, however, is whether young men and women not only have the experience of similar sexual conduct, but also whether they give similar meanings to

these experiences. It is not clear whether we are facing a fading of the traditional gendered sexual double standard towards an emerging single script or a process of fragmentation, redefinition and recomposition of sexual scripts under new patterns.

### **Scripting first sexual intercourse**

In order to answer this question, I analyse qualitative data from a sample of 51 young men and women aged 18 to 34 living in Piedmont, a North-Western Italian region. I focus on the way young people account for their first sexual intercourse as a meaningful experience by referring to the socially available sexual scripts, which represent the rules and expected moves of heterosexual interaction. On the one hand, since first coitus represents the debut of their sexual biography, we might expect that young people will interpret this event according to traditional scripts embedded in the social context they have been raised in. On the other hand, since for the younger generations having sex is a socially legitimate activity detached from the attainment of a marital status, we might expect that they feel freer to negotiate and interpret sexual scripts in a more creative manner.

I have identified four typical sexual scripts (Holloway 1996, Wight 1996) that young men and women use not only to depict their conduct, but also to make sense of their experience. The first is the romantic script, which emphasises emotional involvement (being in love) and the specialness of the event and of the partner of first sexual intercourse. The second is the pragmatic script, by which young people highlight the instrumental meaning of sexual experience as a way to get an outlet for a physical urge and/or gain status, usually within the gendered peer group. The third is the dramatic script, in which what is at stake is the negative aspect of first intercourse



as a traumatic experience entailing negative feelings like shame, fear, pain, unease, or sense of failure. The last one is the comic script, focussing on sex as playing a new game within a step-by-step and trial-and-error learning process, based on a symmetrical and negotiated relationship.

What is more interesting, however, is not only to identify which scripts are more recurrent, but also to analyse how young Italian men and women use these scripts in accounting for their first sexual experiences. In fact, to describe the diffusion of cultural resources, as a sort of cultural scenario or repertoire, does not tell us about what people do with them and how they employ them to make sense of their gendered heterosexual experiences. I have therefore outlined four ‘tactics’ (De Certeau 1990), showing how young men and women move within the constraints of the sexual double standard and of a strongly gendered notion of (hetero)sexuality.

### **Complying with the double standard**

The first tactic is to comply with gendered sexual scripts, reproducing dominant notions of male and female sexuality. Some scripts appear to be ‘more gendered’ than others in terms of those who adopt them: the romantic script is more frequently adopted by women (11 out of 22), the pragmatic by men (11 out of 29). By using the female-romantic versus the male-pragmatic scripts, many young men and women describe themselves and their partners by conforming to very traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. Women using the romantic script talk of love more than sexual desire and describe their male partners as ‘naturally’ more ‘in need of sex’; moreover, men are acknowledged an active role of guiding women into the discovery of sex;

It happened when I was 18-and-a-half, I met this guy 10 years older than me. I fell in love with him very quickly(...)It was a very beautiful experience, because he was very tender, very mature...we did it at his house, very quietly and with the right pace and that's why it was very beautiful, because he was so nice. It was like when a mother takes her child's hand and goes along with him to the first primary school day, this is the scene coming to my mind(...)The first time it was something emotional, with feelings, not just for the sake of pleasure.

(Giulia, 34 years old)

In contrast, young men refer to the pragmatic script, describing themselves as hunters and their female partner as prey. They talk of this experience in terms of getting rid of their virginity, emphasising their active role more than the emotional involvement with their partners, who are often just an occasional acquaintance.

My first time was after secondary school exams, with a younger girl(...) After the exams we went to my friend's house in the mountains, we stayed 3-4 days, and I met her there. It happened on the same night I made her acquaintance. We were in the attic, she said 'I'll sleep here', but she didn't have pyjamas, and between one thing and another, it was clear there was a mutual attraction, I kissed her....At first, she said 'no', I didn't pressure her, then she said: 'I would like...'it was very fast...it lasted a short time.

(Samuele, 25 years old)

Other scripts, like the dramatic script, are adopted by a similar number of men and women, but having two very different versions, highlighting gendered aspects: being pressured and being afraid of pain and blood loss for women, and having a fear

of failing and of premature ejaculation for men. Moreover, while young women describe themselves as ‘victims’ of something that ‘happened’ or ‘was done’ to them, men underline their active role, even if not meeting the hegemonic male standard;

My first time was a bit forced... I mean I hadn't absolutely planned it(...)

We started this sort of physical relationship that one night, more because of his pressures than because of what I wanted. And it happened. It happened on the beach(...)I don't regret it, but I could definitely have waited, because he was not particularly interested in me nor particularly sensitive towards me.

(Eliana, 23 years old)

I was terrible, it was a flop(...)I came immediately, in one second. Let's say I was afraid of failing and because of this fear I couldn't do my best(...)It was horrible. Not horrible...I remember that anyway she was very clever, but however she was more expert than me, she had already done it, she had done it the first time at 16...but women say they have had one cock and they've had ten...you can never know...they are never sincere about that...well, I was ridiculous.

(Rocco, 25 years old)

In these two quotations we find a strong reproduction of the sexual double standard: Eliana stresses a naturalised view of men's sexual desire pressing women to give in, while Rocco recalls women's strategy to manage their reputation by downplaying the number of sexual partners ('cocks') they have had.

What is peculiar about the conformity to highly gendered sexual scripts is the importance that young men explicitly or implicitly give to their peer group as the

homosocial context producing and sustaining the validity of the scripts themselves. Behind young men's sexual debut there seems to be always, virtually or actually, a male audience fixing the normative standard of male experience, as Edoardo admits:

It was more in order to boast with the friends than for myself. You know, maybe I was going out with a girl that many friends of mine would have liked to have and they could not. So they asked me what her tits were like, what she was like...this sort of shit. I was kind of the explorer of the legion, I did not do my exploration on my own. Well, of course it's not that I was never interested in her, but there was always the pack following me everywhere. In bed too.

(Edoardo, 26 years old)

This mechanism is more complex for young women, since they seem to be under the scrutiny of both a male gaze (usually the sexual partner's, but also male friends') and a female gaze (the female friends'), both entailing and reproducing a differentiated and complementary understanding of male and female sexuality. This is the case for Loredana:

It wasn't negative, not at all, but it happened so quickly, also because at the beginning I was not able...At the same time my best friend, she was going out with my boyfriend's friend, much older than him, about eight years older than her, so I remember that I couldn't, he was exerting pressure, not in a bad way, he said 'see, I'm older...'. He, he could not really...enter'...probably because I was afraid and because of my family values. Then my friend, she did it, she talked to me about it, so I calmed down and after few days we succeeded.

(Loredana, 22 years old)

In her account, Loredana reframes her experience of the first sexual intercourse (in a previous account, she admitted to being ‘a bit forced’) in a new light after ‘normalising’ it through her female friend’s accounts, thereby adopting a male view. The heterosocial and the homosocial network, therefore, seem to work convergently for women: Loredana’s female friend accounts for men’s sexual urges by referring to a naturalised and normalised view of male sexuality, embodying ‘the male in the head’ (Holland et al. 1998).

### **In/subverting the double standard**

A second tactic is represented by the inversion/subversion of a traditionally gendered sexual script: this is the case when young women (6 out of 22) describe their sexual experience by referring to typical elements of the scripted male sexuality (desires, initiative, pleasure) or when young men (11 out of 29) emphasise typical components of the expected female script (emotional commitment and caring). In these accounts, some young men and women seem to engage in resisting the conventional definition of gendered sexual scripts. In so doing, a few young men explicitly distance themselves from the homosocial male community, focussing on the heterosexual couple (as a heterosocial context) as the main source of the meanings of their sexual experiences. Therefore, young men adopting a romantic script emphasise their emotional involvement and the meaningful frame provided by their relational commitment. Their first sexual intercourse is described less as a male action than as an experience shared with the partner at the practical level, as well as for the meaning embedded. Moreover, they tend to provide a more detailed depiction of the context in which they made love, paying attention to the place, the ambience, and so on.

I arrived [at my first sexual intercourse] as a laugh because at the beginning we talked about making love, this sort of things, but we didn't fix a day because it is beautiful to do it spontaneously, isn't it?(...)So we started this sort of a game. We arranged one day to meet to watch a movie, without knowing we had to do something else. This day we put this videotape on, it was *Shakespeare in Love*, but the movie was so nice, we were there and I was quite emotionally moved, in fact, I didn't get an erection quickly because I was moved, and then we made love.

(Giulio, 21 years old)

In young women's accounts, the adoption of a typically male pragmatic script seems to increase their sexual agency: these women tend to describe themselves more as sexual subjects, taking the initiative and enjoying the experience. In so doing, they reverse the traditional female sexual script by which sexual experience, while increasing male (sexual) reputation and being expected to be reported to the male peer group, endangers female reputation, thereby needing to be hidden or covered. As in Silvia's narrative, boasting about and publicly celebrating 'the event' becomes part of an acknowledged transition to female adulthood, reproducing very clearly the typical male ritual of 'getting rid of virginity'.

The first time I was 18, the other person was about 5-6 years older, 6 or 7, something like that. I was at a party and I saw this guy - a friend of another guy that I liked(...)We started to talk and one thing led to another and we had sex together. I was very happy. He didn't know I had never had sex with anyone else(...)It was a wonderful experience, also because I was very happy that it was something mine and only mine, that is that there were no questions like 'Am I hurting you?' 'What's happening?'. I was

worried by the idea of doing it with someone of the same age, at his first experience(...)About five minutes later, the day after, more or less all my female friends knew about it, and there was a big celebration, yes, yes(...) A great get-together, opening bottles, excitement and happiness, and congratulations from everybody.

(Silvia, 27 years old)

While in these young men's account the homosocial context seems to lose its priority, in young women's, on the contrary, it acquires importance because it allows and supports a rejection of an objectifying male perception to incorporate an empowering understanding of female sexual agency.

### **Constructing a single sexual standard**

The third tactic is the construction of a seemingly single 'gender neutral' script, the comic script, which downplays the differences between the two partners by emphasising the shared elements of the first sexual (in)experience. Previous research pointed out that, while seemingly involved in the same sexual experience, men and women are never 'in the same boat' because what makes sense of the heterosexual debut is the 'male in the head' as a single standard (Holland et al. 1998).

In my interviewees' accounts (albeit a minority, 2 out of 29 men and 2 out of 22 women), however, there is reference to a 'common script' focusing on complicity and fun and using a humorous language, as in Betty and Filippo's narratives;

The first time, maybe more for him than for me, because he had never had a girlfriend before, he was a little wimp, let's say it.(...)I didn't expect a fantastic experience, like many people say 'what an experience!'

absolutely not, I kept my feet on the ground. I was aware we were both inexperienced, so it was clear it wouldn't be a performance like *9 and a Half Weeks*. I remember we really laughed, a lot(...)

(Betty, 22 years old)

My first sexual experience happened three years ago, with the girl who's now my girlfriend. It happened one afternoon when, finally she had the house to herself.(...)For her it was the first time too. So, at the end, that afternoon, at last we went all the way, let's say in that way, and clearly we had many things to learn, well, it was nice. Mainly disrupted by some things, you know, at the beginning, first simply to understand, you know, you sit there and 'Well, now how should we do it?', then you try, you put, do, take...I don't know if you read Giobbe Covatta [an Italian comedian], the sketch on the Bible, 'They tried with the knee'...something like that. (...) And then worries about condoms, that is, 'Did you put it on correctly?' 'You put it on wrong' 'Yes, don't worry' 'Ah, you've touched it, wash your hands'. I said 'Is that it?'. It was something like that, but we got there in the end(...)

(Filippo, 29 years old)

In these accounts, the distinction between active male and passive female roles is challenged by the notion of 'learning together'; moreover, the fear of pain for women and flopping for men is replaced by shared jokes and laughter (having fun together instead of making fun of somebody). Also, in this script the first sexual intercourse occurs within a couple-relational context characterised by mutual emotional involvement and commitment. However, unlike the romantic script, sex is described as a game in which the two players have the same status. The adoption of this script



seems to be favoured by partners of about the same age, with the same lack of experience and the same emotional involvement.

### **Combining multiple scripts**

A final interesting tactic is some interviewees' use of multiple scripts. This feature has already been outlined by other researchers, showing how, in the field of sexuality, different, if not competing, discourses (conventional and resistant, hegemonic and alternative, traditional and post-traditional) tend to coexist in young people's accounts (Allen 2003, Maxwell 2007, Korobov 2008). In my findings, this occurs mainly in young men's accounts: a typical case is when they combine elements of different scripts, for instance accounting for their first sexual intercourse by describing the context with a romantic language while admitting a pragmatic aim focused on gaining status within the male peer group. This is how Giandomenico, 24 years old, talks about his sexual debut,

It happened at my grandmother's house one afternoon.(...) We used to go there after school, we stayed in my room to talk and listen to music. Sometimes we lay on the bed, but didn't do anything more than kissing and cuddling. That afternoon we got naked and she asked me whether we could do it.(...)We weren't afraid even though neither of us had never done it before. We were calm and we discovered it together.(...)Then I was excited because doing it for the first time was like overcoming something in your life – until you've done it you're worried about it and you see all the other guys doing it one after another.

Among women, it is more typical to combine the dramatic and the romantic script, the first used to describe the actual experience (entailing fear, pain, shame) and the second to reframe it within the brighter light of love and to reaffirm a sense of control over one's own life.

### **Final remarks and discussion**

While survey data suggest an increasing similarity in younger men and women's sexual conduct and a fading of the gendered sexual double standard, qualitative data show a more nuanced and complex picture. Focussing in particular on the first steps in sexual biographies, I have shown how the majority of young men and women make sense of their sexual debut in different ways, conforming to a gendered definition of heterosexuality. In complying with the socially available traditional scripts, young people make evident the process of reproduction of the sexual double standard which is taken for granted by naturalising a differentiated notion of masculinity and femininity. Young women tend to frame their first sexual intercourse within a romantic script, justifying their male partner's sexual pressure to give in. Young men, on the contrary, account for the first time they have had sex as a threshold they must cross because of their natural desire as well as to live up to their peer group normative expectations. However, young people seem to find room for some forms of resistance. Some of them engage in a subversion/inversion of the gendered sexual double standard; in particular, young men adopt a romantic script which lets them express an emotional involvement and downplay male sexual performance.

But despite this process of subversion/inversion there are still some relics of a gendered double standard, pointing towards the different positions of men and women

within the couple: they share emotional involvement, but the male partner is still supposed to take the initiative and lead the sexual game. A very few young people challenge the double standard by constructing a new script, the comic script, providing the discursive space for a notion of heterosexuality as a matter of equality. This seems to be young people's way of taking up intimacy as the new hegemonic cultural script for the adult stage of sexual lifecourse, as an outcome of the so called 'sexual revolution' by which different sexual norms and values have emerged as dominant (Ehrenreich et al. 1986, Hawkes 2006): the intimacy script points at symmetry between the two partners, at the couple as a sensemaking context in which rules and meanings are constructed, and at sex as a way of creating and maintaining mutual disclosure and understanding within the couple. Although this script is adopted by only a handful of young people to frame the first steps of their sexual biographies, survey data show that the contextual conditions of its emergence (more symmetrical features of the two partners) are becoming more widespread, so we can expect that this will become more common in the future.

Finally, some interviewees adopt a combination of scripts. It is interesting that this multiple positioning occurs more with young men than with young women because survey data have suggested a stronger redefinition of female sexuality and a relatively stable reproduction of male sexuality. Some young men may feel that they are not able to adopt a romantic or intimacy script to account for their first sexual intercourse, and perhaps are only able within the safe space of the in-depth interview to find room to express their emotional involvement. However, in this sheltered setting, some young men also look for a confirmation of their masculinity by reframing elements of the romanticism or intimacy within a more pragmatic script.

On the contrary, young women appear more able to use the romantic or intimacy scripts and they tend to adopt mixed scripts less frequently.

The difference hints at the emergence of new forms of double standard, linked to the ability of young men and women, to adopt different tactics to manage socially available scripts. This suggests that research on young people's sexuality should shift from focussing mainly on the contents of young people's narratives (the components of the sexual scripts) to take into account the contexts of their production, restraining or enabling different uses of the same scripts<sup>4</sup>. Young women seem to be more socially legitimised (within the peer group and the heterosexual couple as well as within the contemporary sexual culture at large) to adopt the intimacy script, while for young men the challenge is often to be sensitive and macho at the same time (Allen 2007). Therefore more attention should be paid to the forms of male homosociality enabling and supporting "alternative" notions of heterosexual masculinity: some interviewees mention the importance of intimate male friendship as a safe space for doing different masculinities. Moreover, the context to be taken into account is not only the actual social setting in which masculinities are performed (stressing, for instance, the different forms of disclosure men enact while they are interviewed alone, within a male group, within a gender-mixed group and within the heterosexual couple) but the social interactions sustaining the ongoing process of making sense of sexual experiences and of gender performances. If, traditionally, men have given priority to male homosociality over the heterosexual couple to attribute and share the meaning of their heterosexual masculinity (Flood 2008), it may be interesting to explore how men do their masculinities when they reverse this ranking and position their heterosexual relationship at the core: how this affects them doing their

heterosexualities and their masculinities. Moreover, mixing up scripts and assuming a self-ironic stance appears to be a symbolic resource for men to potentially adopt a reflexive approach to sexual culture and to the understanding of their masculinities.

In conclusion, researching sexual cultures requires not only investigating repertoires of socially available sexual scripts, but also taking into account the social contexts in which these cultural resources are embedded and which make them more or less meaningful. Therefore young people's sexual biographies, from their very beginning, as in the first sexual intercourse experiences we have analysed, seem both to be moulded by sexual cultures and to reshape them by creatively reproducing, reinterpreting and hybridising socially available sexual scripts.

#### **Note on contributor**

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## Notes

1. For the origin of this concept, see Thomas (1959). The notion of a sexual double standard has very blurred boundaries. It can include the context of the sexual experience (for example, premarital or extramarital sex), the kind of sexual practices, sexual initiative (who makes the first move), emotional involvement (with or without love), the number of sexual partners, and also the adopted language, clothing, make-up, places attended, and so on. See Crawford and Popp (2003).

2. The main findings of this research are published in Barbagli M., G. Dalla Zuanna and F. Garelli (2010).

3. This paragraph includes some parts written together with Chiara Bertone. See in particular Ferrero Camoletto R and Bertone C. (2010).

4. A fruitful contribution from this perspective can be found in Flood (2008) and Paetcher (2003a, 2003b).